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ABSTRACT

Several theories of the alcoholic personality have been devised to determine the relationship between the clusters of personality characteristics of alcoholics and their abuse of alcohol. The oldest and probably best known theory is the dependency theory, formulated in the tradition of classical psychoanalysis, which associates the alcoholic's difficulties with dependence-independence conflicts with events that go back to early childhood. The anxiety theory states that alcoholics are persons with high anxiety levels who drink excessively to alleviate their anxiety. The power theory holds that excessive male drinkers have exaggerated needs to feel powerful, and gratify their needs through vicarious powerful experiences while drinking. Research on female alcoholics suggests that these women have a fragile sense of self and use alcohol to make themselves feel more womanly. The four theories each identify some personality deficiency in the alcoholic and observe the alcoholic's use of alcohol in an attempt to compensate for that deficiency. No single theory appears to account for the personality of all alcoholics. (Author/HLM)

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Theories of the Alcoholic Personality*

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The image that comes to many people's minds upon hearing the term "alcoholic personality" is that of a readily identifiable personality that is easily distinguishable from nonalcoholic personalities. This image also seems to carry with it the idea that it is the distinctive personality that was both the necessary and sufficient condition for a personal to become alcoholic. Moreover, most people who think that this is what is meant by the alcoholic personality immediately discount the concept and, in fact, become indignant that anybody could have been so naive as to suggest it in the first place. To support their position, they call attention to the wide variations in the personalities of alcoholics and the fact that persons with a wide diversity of backgrounds (ranging from astronauts to skid row bums to the wives and brothers of Presidents) become alcoholic. No more is to be gained, they contend, in assuming that there is an alcoholic personality than in assuming that there is a diabetic personality or a cancerous personality or an asthmatic personality.

One purpose of this symposium is to correct this popular misconception of the alcoholic personality. At the outset there are several points that I want to make with regard to what those researchers and clinicians who accept the concept of an alcoholic personality mean and do not mean by the term.

1. There is a cluster of personality characteristics that is typically found among individuals who are alcoholic. As the symposium proceeds, we will delineate what the particular cluster is.

2. Some of the cluster of personality characteristics can be identified long before the onset of alcoholism and seem to contribute to its development. Other parts of the cluster appear to have been engendered

by the individual's experience with alcohol. Later on the program, Rod Loper will discuss the research that tries to separate those personality characteristics that seem to predispose an individual to become alcoholic from those that seem to be consequences of the alcoholism.

3. The typical cluster of alcoholic personality characteristics may not be found among all alcoholics, and some individuals who are not alcoholic may exhibit the cluster. Thus, we cannot always distinguish alcoholics from nonalcoholics simply by looking at their personalities.

4. There actually is not just one cluster of personality characteristics but several different ones that have been identified among alcoholics. Later, Douglas Jackson will discuss the research that has isolated various alcoholic personality "subtypes."

Given these generalizations, some obvious questions arise: What is the relationship between the clusters of personality characteristics of the alcoholic and his or her abuse of alcohol? How is it that alcoholism is induced by the personality characteristics, and, in turn, how does the encounter with alcohol modify the personality?

To answer these questions, a number of theories of the alcoholic personality have been devised, and I will proceed now to describe several of the representative theoretical frameworks.

The oldest and probably best known theory of the alcoholic personality is the dependency theory which was formulated in the tradition of classical psychoanalysis. Clinicians working with alcoholics have often observed them to have strong proclivities to rely on other people for guidance and decision making and to have a strong need for other people to care for and nurture them. The psychoanalyst, of course, looks for the origin of the alcoholic's difficulties with dependence in early childhood. The mother of

a future alcoholic is thought to have been a dominant and overprotective individual who also harbored ambivalent feelings about her child and thus was inconsistent in her displays of love and affection, the inconsistency being reflected especially in the oral gratification that she allowed her child to obtain. As a result, the child was orally frustrated and remained fixated at this stage of development. The father of the future alcoholic, moreover, is typically seen as a weak and passive individual who did not serve as an appropriate role model for the young male child to identify with. Because of this unhealthy family situation, the child grows up (1) feeling inadequate as a male and (2) craving a relationship in which he can rely on other people to nurture him.

The situation is complicated as our future alcoholic enters adolescence and adulthood because, in order to conform to the traditional role expectations for a male in our society, he must now become independent, masculine, and aggressive. Thus, a conflict arises between the opposing tendencies to be dependent and independent. Dependency theorists see the prealcoholic male as dealing with the conflict in one of three ways. He may continue to display his dependency openly and directly, or he may become counterdependent and show excessive independence and self-reliance in his overt behavior. A third possibility is that he may fluctuate between extreme dependence and extreme independence, according to the particular situation that he is in. But regardless of which strategy is adopted, the underlying conflict is not resolved.

According to dependency theorists, it is at this point that alcohol enters the picture. The male caught in a dependent-independent conflict learns that he can use alcohol to try to resolve the conflict. With alcohol, he can bolster his masculine image by displaying stereotypical

male behavior such as being boisterous and aggressive. At the same time, alcohol allows him to indulge his dependency needs and oral cravings. In fact, if he overindulges to the point where he can no longer take care of himself, other people have to look out for him. In short, alcohol allows him to satisfy his opposing needs simultaneously and in a manner that does not conflict with the dictates of society. He "drinks like a man," and it is the alcohol that makes it necessary that other people take care of him, rather than some inadequacy that is inherent in him. He comes to use alcohol frequently to try to resolve the conflict, and the addictive process sets in.

A second theory of the alcoholic personality which has also been around for a long time is the anxiety theory. It states simply that alcoholics are persons with high levels of anxiety, that alcohol reduces anxiety, and that alcoholics therefore drink excessively in an attempt to alleviate their anxiety. This theory appeals to common sense, since it seems apparent to most people that alcohol does in fact reduce anxiety. Moreover, cross-cultural studies have found some evidence that societies which show high levels of fear and anxiety are also ones that have high levels of drunkenness. On the other hand, experimental work with alcoholics has found that although they do often show high levels of anxiety and they anticipate that alcohol will relieve their anxiety, actual ingestion of alcohol often raises their anxiety to still higher levels. In addition, attempts to develop an animal model of alcoholism have shown conflicting results with regard to whether alcohol (1) actually alters frustration-mediated behaviors and (2) whether animals will voluntarily consume more alcohol when placed in stressful situations. Regardless of what its ultimate utility might be in relating the consumption of alcohol to anxiety, the anxiety theory certainly is

not complete for understanding all of the personality dynamics involved in alcoholism.

A third theory of the alcoholic personality has been offered as an alternative to both the dependency theory and the anxiety theory. This is the power theory proposed by David McClelland and his associates. After ten years of cross-cultural research as well as experimental research testing blue-collar workers and college students in naturalistic drinking situations, McClelland found no evidence that people drink primarily to reduce anxiety. His research did corroborate the observation by advocates of the dependency theory that heavy drinkers often exhibit so-called counterdependent behavior, but he was unable to accept the premise that the counterdependence signifies underlying repressed needs to be dependent, cared for, and orally gratified. McClelland studied the fantasies of men in drinking situations and found that heavy drinking often led to thoughts about subduing threatening adversaries, of winning sexual conquests, or of gaining control over other people in some other way. In short, heavy drinking caused the men in these studies to feel powerful. Moreover, those men who had the greatest concerns for power to begin with were the ones who drank the heaviest. Hence, the power theory holds that men who drink excessively are those with exaggerated needs to feel powerful and that they gratify this need through vicarious powerful experiences while drinking alcohol, rather than by choosing a more tangible means of gaining control over other people.

In discussing the dependency and power theories of the alcoholic personality, I repeatedly referred to the male alcoholic; I discussed events that are thought to occur in the life of the prealcoholic male; and I always used masculine pronouns to refer to alcoholics. Despite the way that it probably sounded, I was not using sexist language. Both the dependency

theory and the power theory refer specifically to male alcoholics, and neither theory was intended to account for alcoholism among women. Alcoholism has traditionally though inaccurately been considered a man's problem, an . this may account for the special theoretical interest in male alcoholism. However, the growing awareness that alcoholism is indeed a problem among women has generated increased interest in the dynamics of alcohol use among women. Significantly, data collected from female social drinkers and alcoholics point to the involvement of different personality factors in female alcoholism than had previously been found for males. From her experimental research exploring the effects of alcohol on women's fantasies, Sharon Wilsnack, for example, found that alcohol did not make women feel more powerful, nor did it make them feel cared for or nurtured. Rather, drinking seemed to enhance feelings associated with traditional femininity and womanliness. In a separate study, Wilsnack found that alcoholic women frequently experienced unconscious sex-role conflicts and were unable successfully to integrate the masculine and feminine aspects of their personalities. Moreover, the alcoholic women often had suffered severe threats to their womanliness (for example, repeated miscarriages, inability to conceive, divorce) before they had started drinking heavily. Thus, Wilsnack theorizes that a woman who drinks excessively tends to have a fragile sense of herself as a woman and therefore drinks in order to make herself feel more womanly. Carole Benson will have more to say about sex differences in alcoholic personality characteristics during her presentation later in the program.

I have now described four theories that account for the involvement of personality factors in alcoholism. In all four cases we saw that the theorist identified some deficiency in the alcoholic's personality and observed how the alcoholic used alcohol in an attempt to compensate for that

deficiency. That the alcoholic would attempt to do so seems quite plausible, but it also seems unlikely that all alcoholics would experience the same deficiency. Thus it may be the case that each theory is correct when it applies to a certain subgroup of alcoholics but that no theory is correct in accounting for the personality of all alcoholics.

References

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